



Pan Macmillan Reading Notes

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Title: The Hypnotist's Love Story

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Thematic & Plot Summary

From the moment we're born everyone is hypnotising us. We are all, to some degree, in a trance. Our clients think we're 'putting them to sleep', but our ultimate goal is the opposite. We're trying to wake them up.

Excerpt from an article written by Ellen O'Farrell for the journal *Hypnotherapy Today* (p 182)

We each have a story, which we repeat to ourselves and others as a way of analysing or explaining our lives. But it's also a story which can be told very differently by others with whom we come in contact. Saskia seems crazy, and has begun to believe in that interpretation. But it might so easily have been otherwise, had Patrick really loved her. Ellen has come to feel like a serially abandoned woman, and has developed defences which make her sometimes a little paranoid, and more than susceptible to a fascination with Saskia's oddity. Patrick has suffered intense grief, left a woman he had loved, and now loves Ellen, but he still bears the scars of grief, and is inclined to be angry when challenged. 'We're all a little crazy, Julia.' (p 47) Who is crazy and who is normal?

One of the central ideas in this novel is that we each carry around the weight of past relationships which can never really be discarded. 'So this Patrick has a crazy ex-girlfriend and a dead ex-wife,' said Julia. 'Sounds like a real catch. No complications whatsoever.' (p 46) We deal with past loves by using terms such as 'caught on the rebound', but we really can't ignore the echoes of the past in present relationships. When Saskia writes: 'I remember I said to him, "That's the most beautiful map I've ever seen"' (p 38), it instantly explains the look on Patrick's face when Ellen had said the same thing to him (p 37). Ellen's three past loves (pp 22-3) instil a sense of fear that Patrick will end things between them, despite the fact that she feels far more comfortable with him. In Patrick's case, it's the death of his wife, which haunts him and the fear of things turning bad as they did with his 'rebound' relationship with Saskia. And sometimes, as in Saskia's case, the past becomes a corruptive and dangerous shadow forcing the person to become fixated on the lost love, and obsessive in their loss, to the point of activities such as stalking. 'Aren't we all capable of it? I always think love is a kind of madness.' (p 127)

We all like to feel that love is meant to be just as Ellen does when she meets Patrick. 'She'd always thought of these failed relationships as, well, failures. But it occurred to her now that perhaps they were actually essential steps in a predestined journey leading to this very moment on this very beach. To a green-eyed surveyor called Patrick Scott.' (p 23) But subsequent events cause her to question that, as she recognises that Patrick has residual feelings for his dead wife, Colleen, begins to feel sympathy for Saskia's grief, and to observe that all her associates and clients are suffering some sort of re-assessment of their lives with others. She also realises when she hears that her former lover Jon is to marry that she still has residual grief about the breakup. 'She did not want to be married to him, and yet she did not want him to marry someone else. She did not want him, but she wanted him to want her.' (p 137) Saskia had also felt her love with Patrick was predestined, and failed to realise that he didn't feel the same way. Her tragedy was that she met him less than a year after his wife Colleen's death, and that he really wasn't ready for a relationship. 'I thought Patrick was my perfect love story. Except he's not. He's the hypnotist's love story. I'm the ex-girlfriend in the hypnotist's love story. Not the heroine. I'm only a minor character. Or perhaps I'm the villain.' (pp 263-4)

The practice and power of hypnotherapy is another central theme in this novel. 'I don't want to have a baby with someone I don't love. You can do that, right? Make me believe that I love him? So I haven't made the worst mistake of my life?' (p 205) Each of Ellen's clients begins therapy with the idea that she can magically change them but she shows them that they need to heal themselves with the assistance of her therapy, which reveals to them what they really feel and want in life. She, Patrick, and Saskia also heal themselves as the novel progresses. The ethics of therapy and

particularly using it on those you love is also teased out in Ellen's relaxation techniques with Patrick and later with her realisation that she's 'crossed a line' in sending him into a deeper trance. Her treatment of her patients too comes under scrutiny when Rosie's husband misinterprets her treatment, and when Luisa calls her a quack. And her mentoree Danny's 'hypno-parties' are an extreme example of how therapy may be used in an unethical or cynical fashion!

The novel points out in a variety of ways how childhood experiences and relationships determine our adult selves. 'It just went to show how your childhood experiences were imprinted on your subconscious.' (p 223) Ellen's fatherless childhood and her very independent medico mother have made her seek a happy family life, and her failure to do so has left her feeling insecure. When she meets her father David, she's unsure how to process the news. 'She longed to tell her grandparents about this new development in her life, that David Greenfield, that strange, enticing name on her birth certificate, was no longer the carefully selected sperm donor of her youth, but the "loveliest man her mother had ever known". It was like hearing that Santa Claus really did exist after all, when you no longer cared or believed in the possibility of magic, when it was just plain confusing.' (p 215) Patrick has lost his teenage sweetheart, and has never really confronted what that meant to him. Saskia's attachment to her dead mother has made her deeply fearful of abandonment, and perhaps explains her extreme reaction when Patrick leaves her. Jack is still processing losing his mother, and then Saskia, and has developed an adult veneer of resilience to deal with it.

The novel also shows how painful a breakup can be not only for the adults but also for the children involved. Patrick clearly didn't realise how much losing Jack would grieve Saskia. And he failed to acknowledge Jack's feelings in losing a second 'mother'. All the adults in this novel view Jack's behaviour in terms of their own feelings, and fail initially to understand that he too may have residual issues to deal with.

Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment. Buddhist quote on Ellen's bathroom mirror
As Ellen says, her goal in therapy is to 'wake' people up to their inner selves. She wakes up to the feelings she's underestimated in her own life, including her lack of a father, and a determinedly single mother. Her love for Patrick is consolidated when she stops comparing herself to Saskia, and to Colleen, and recognises that now Patrick loves her. Patrick accepts that his new love is an adult love. Saskia realises that the past has been holding her back. Ellen, Patrick and Saskia are finally living truly in the present. And it's a supremely contented place to be.

Writing Style

1. Narrative Perspective, Person and Tense: Ch 1 opens in first person, present tense, with a client observing their unnamed hypnotherapist, then switches mid-chapter to third person, past tense as Ellen the hypnotherapist, observes herself with Patrick Scott, a single dad and self-employed surveyor whom she has been dating, and with whom she is falling in love. Then in Ch 2, p 27 we suddenly hear Saskia's voice, in first person, present tense. It ends ominously, with the words 'I am looking forward to my next appointment with the hypnotist' (p 28) (revealing that she is one of Ellen's clients. Discuss the interplay between person and tense in this novel.

2. The novel also contains **quotes** at the head of each chapter from texts related to the action. Choose any one of these quotes to discuss in terms of the novel. For example:

Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.

The classic conscious autosuggestion created by the famous French psychologist and pharmacist (the 'father of autohypnosis'), Émile Coué (1857–1926) (p 311)

3. What aspects of **style** did you particularly notice in reading this novel?

4. Dialogue is integral to the characterisation in this novel. Choose a passage and discuss what it reveals about the characters engaged in the conversation.

5. Humour is a key stylistic device in the novel, too. There are some hilarious scenes, in which often humour is about the petty things (such as Patrick's boxes piled up in Ellen's hall) which cause tension in a relationship. Choose one scene and discuss the use of humour in it.

The Author

Liane Moriarty is the author of three novels, *Three Wishes*, *The Last Anniversary* and *What Alice Forgot*, all of which were published successfully around the world and translated into seven languages. Writing as L.M. Moriarty, she is also the author of the '*Space Brigade*' series for children. Liane lives in Sydney with her husband, daughter and son. For more information visit her website www.lianemoriarty.com.au/about.html.

Questions for Discussion

1. The quote regarding hypnosis (p 1) is an excellent introduction to the topic. Have you ever been in a trance? How did it feel, in retrospect? What did you remember of it? Were you alarmed or excited by the fact that you were able to enter such a different, rather dream-like zone, whilst being awake? The ethics of therapy (p 175) is another topic in the novel. Ellen crosses a line in treating Patrick. Discuss.

2. 'Rejection by a lover or even only a potential lover was so tough on the Inner Child. Fears of abandonment, memories of past hurts, feelings of inferiority and self-loathing all rose to the surface in an unstoppable torrent of feeling.' (p 6) When Saskia reflects on her mother's death (pp 159–60) we realise how devastating Patrick's abandonment was only four weeks later. As adults, do we burden our relationships by viewing them through the prism of this childhood fear of abandonment?

3. 'It sometimes seemed so peculiar and wrong to her that you could be that intimate with someone, to go to sleep with them and wake up with them, to do really quite extraordinarily personal things together on a regular basis, and then, suddenly, you don't even know their telephone number, or where they're living, or working, or what they did today or last week or last year ... That's why break-ups felt like your skin was being torn from your body. It was actually strange that *more* people weren't like Saskia, instead of being so well-behaved and dignified about it.' (p 24) Break-ups are painful because love turns to hate or indifference so easily. Discuss.

4. 'Each time she clicked on to the website she felt like she was doing something vaguely unseemly. Unseemly for *her*. That was the crux of it. She didn't think there was anything unseemly about anyone else doing internet dating. Oh, no, it was fine for the unwashed masses! But Ellen helped people with their personal lives for a *living*.' (p 25) Is internet dating really any different to the random way in which we meet and choose life partners?

5. Ch 4 opens with a legal definition of stalking. Have you had any such experience? "You mean she's making women look bad?" said Ellen. "It's normally men who do the stalking. It's good. She's showing women can stalk just as effectively as men." (p 42) Discuss the implication of Ellen's statement. Julia puts a 'human' face on stalking when she confesses to having rung her teenage boyfriend's new lover a number of times: 'I felt as if I didn't exist anymore. Ringing her up somehow made me exist. It was like an addiction.' (p 44) Does this justify her actions? And has cyber stalking added a new complexity to this topic?

6. 'There was no problem practising mindfulness when you were at the start of a relationship. It happened automatically. All that sex. All those chemicals zipping through your body. And all that *appreciation*.' (p 40) Is love a form of trance? And what happens when we wake up from it?

7. 'This was the problem with being friends with someone who knew you when you were a teenager. They never quite take you seriously because they always see you as your stupid teenage self.' (p 46) Julia and Ellen's relationship (Ch 4) dates from being schoolgirls together. Discuss the differences between teenage friendships and those forged in our more mature years.

8. 'It was true that she wasn't unhappy about Patrick being a widower. She quite liked the fact that it made it more complicated.' (p 46) Is Ellen's admission typical of women? Or is her need to deal with complications driven by her professional interests? 'Every time she was with Patrick, part of her was imagining how Saskia would react if she was there, watching. It was as if she were performing in her own reality TV show with an audience of just one.' (p 102) Is Ellen's interest in Saskia unusual? Or would any woman have found this stalker fascinating?

9. Patrick's sudden announcement that Jack is coming to dinner (pp 48–9) throws Ellen amusingly into a panic. Is this reaction typical of a woman in such a situation?

10. Saskia became a surrogate mother to Jack and was in the role 'Long enough for him to call for me whenever he had a bad dream. Me. Not Daddy. He always called for me.' (p 97) Is there a hint that perhaps Patrick was jealous of Saskia, although he never admits to that? 'When you're responsible for a child, when your days are filled with the tiny details that make up a child's life – his lunch box, his school bag, his shoes, his favourite T-shirt, his friends, his friends' mothers, his TV shows, his temper tantrums – and then you're told that you are no longer responsible, that you are no longer wanted, that your services are no longer required, that you have been made redundant, like an employee walked to the door by security, it is difficult. It is quite profoundly difficult.' (p 262) Saskia was virtually made redundant as a mother; this must happen often; discuss how you would feel in this circumstance.

11. 'I never understood alcoholics or gambling addicts before. Just stop it, I always thought, when I heard about somebody wrecking their life because of a stupid addiction. But now I get it. It's like telling someone to stop breathing.' (p 98) Discuss addictions.

12. 'Dying was final and mysterious and gave you the last word forever.' (p 113) Discuss.

13. 'That was the problem. Much too soon. He never grieved. Men are terrible grievers. Whenever they feel anything bad they just try and stomp it down.' (p 120) Discuss.

14. 'If I didn't hate him so intensely maybe I would have been able to stop loving him.' (p 263) 'The only way for me to not be crazy would be to disappear from his life. Like a proper ex-girlfriend is expected to do. To discreetly vanish into the past. And that's what drives me . . . crazy.' (p 90) 'But what life? Patrick and Ellen *are* my life. Without them, there's just a job and a flat and a car that needs a new automatic transmission and that's about it.' (p 201) Discuss Saskia's obsession, with reference to these three quotes.

15. 'They all sounded ever so slightly American, and there was an amused casualness about the way they saw the world, as if nothing was beyond them. Maybe it was technology. It put power in their fingertips.' (p 143) Is this an apt description of Gen Y?

16. '“Hindsight,” said her father. “It's always just a fraction too late.”' (p 429) Discuss.

17. '“Children think they're the centre of the universe,” said Ellen. “That's why they blame themselves.”' (p 403) When Patrick realises that Jack had thought he was responsible for Saskia leaving, he realises that the breakup was his as well. Do adults tend to focus on their own feelings and underestimate those of children?

18. Ellen and Patrick seem to have discovered equilibrium in their relationship at the end of the novel, and Saskia has made new friends and put her grief behind her. What is the key to their contentment, and is it likely to last?